

# Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



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Before considering the specific content of this book, it is useful to recognize the importance of its having been published at all. The word *Yehud* in the title is the term used in documents from the fifth century BCE to refer to the territory in and around Jerusalem that functioned as a colony of the Persian Empire. That colony became the venue for the construction of Jewish identity and the formation of a Judaism in which the inhabitants of the colony inescapably engaged in a high-wire act of accommodation and resistance to the empire. The book reflects an increasingly intense scholarly focus on the Persian period of Judaism as the generative period for the formation of the Hebrew Bible and the construction of Jewish identity.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this shift in critical assumptions about the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. It was not very long ago that the historicity of Israel's early traditions—sustained by a particular reading of archaeological evidence—was assumed. This assumption, which served conservative theological interests, was particularly emphasized in the United States through John Bright's *History of Israel*, which became a standard and widely used textbook and was twinned in a softer manner by Bernhard Anderson's *Understanding the Old Testament*. The counterpoint to the accent on the early traditions was a major disregard of postexilic material, partly because we did not have much historical data and partly because that period did not seem to concern Christian readers, what with the characteristic leap from 2 Isaiah to the New Testament.

Now all of that has changed. Critical scholarship in general has lost confidence in the historicity of the early traditions and has come to think that Judaism in the Persian period reused older memories and reformulated them into the text as we have it. The practical effect of this shift in critical perspective is to resituate the tradition as a resource for a community that must maintain its distinct identity in the face of a seductive and insistent empire.

The present volume provides a series of specific studies concerning the recovery and interpretation of that colonial community of distinct identity. The editor, Jon Berquist, is himself a distinguished scholar of the period and the author of *Judaism in Persia's Shadow* (1995). Berquist has rallied a number of younger scholars who have not had so much to unlearn because they have from the outset focused their work on this period. Among the rich resources of this book, three essays are especially suggestive.

Donald Polaski of the College of William and Mary considers the famous Behistun Inscription, a Persian inscription carved on a mountain on "a major thoroughfare in what is now western Iran." It is "visible but not legible," and "getting close enough to read the inscription is almost impossible." Given that observable reality, Polaski makes two interpretive judgments. First, the function of the inscription is not to communicate information, but to establish a trusted textual icon of authority that reflects a world "involving power, display, and obfuscation." Second, he moves from this Persian textual icon to texts in the Hebrew Bible that reflect the same kind of iconic authority, all around the Deuteronomistic tradition. These include Joshua 24 on covenant making, Joshua 22 on altar building and Joshua 8 on covenant as a textual event. This in turn leads to Josiah and the finding of the scroll (Deuteronomy?). This

sequence of interpretive moves leads to Polaski's consideration of the way in which Israel (Judaism) became a community of textuality that finds its identity in text making and text copying—scribal activity. The textual work of Israel thus parallels and challenges that “visible but illegible” text of Persia.

Second, Brent Strawn of Emory University studies the artistic presentation of the Apadana Reliefs, located in Persepolis, a major commercial and political center of ancient Persia. He is able to identify two defining themes in the artistry, solar imagery and tribute processions of camels streaming to the city with willingly given tribute from colonial communities. For that adulation of Persian commerce and power, Strawn finds a remarkable parallel in Isaiah 60, a text from the same period. In that text there is solar imagery (“rise and shine,” v. 1), and there is tribute loaded on camels that culminates in the gift of the magi, gold and frankincense (v. 6). Strawn concludes that Judaism “co-opted and reapplied” Persian reality, utilizing Persian propaganda to make a case for its own significant place in the world.

Third, Christine Mitchell, who teaches at St. Andrew's College in Saskatoon, focuses on a plaintive statement about Yehud, “How lonely sits the city” (Lam 1:1), and proposes that the great narrative of Genesis through 2 Kings is an answer to the question of how to maintain communal identity in the face of wholesale loss. Thus the primary narrative of the Hebrew Bible is an intentional construct designed to narrate an identity in the face of an empire that would, if it could, override local identities.

There is much more here for a patient reader. The book is an important one because it summons readers to much unlearning and relearning about the Bible. The unlearning concerns the historical positivism in which most progressives are schooled. The relearning involves seeing, as against a static view of scripture, that the Bible is a generative, intentionally constructive tradition that is a response to particular historical crises that jeopardized the identity of the community. The generative, constructive quality of the text is on exhibit everywhere in this collection of essays.

The particularity of these essays requires attentiveness and patience. But the particularity is important in order for readers to see the care and daring imagination through which this community replicated and co-opted the claims of empire. Though the essays do nothing toward contemporaneity, issues remain even now concerning the maintenance of community identity in the face of empire. It strikes me, on reading this book, how our conventional biblical education, whether critical or

conservative, has ill equipped us for this work—indeed, ill equipped us even to notice the means of generativity that are available to us. The book is a lesson in history concerning accommodation and resistance. It is also an invitation to contemporary generativity.